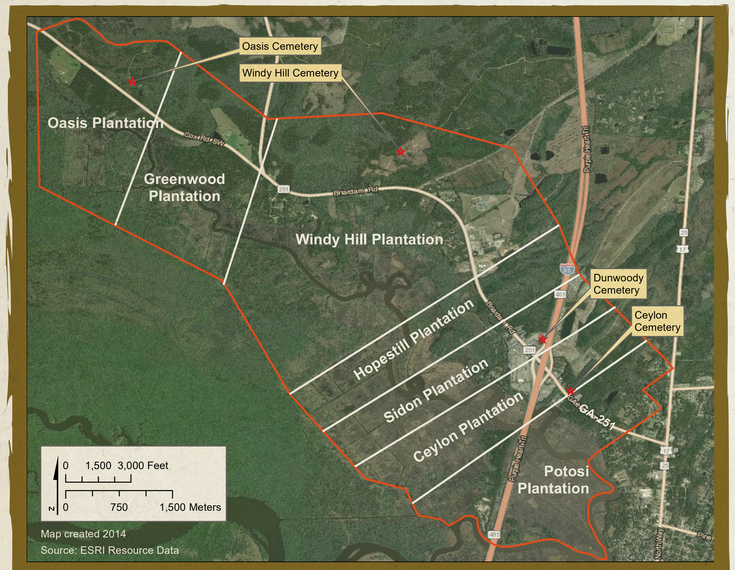
CATHEAD CREEK

HISTORIC DISTRICT AND AFRICAN AMERICAN BURIAL GROUNDS

THE CATHEAD CREEK HISTORIC DISTRICT IS AN IMPORTANT PLACE IN AFRICAN AMERICAN HISTORY AND CULTURE THAT DESERVES TO BE RECOGNIZED AND REMEMBERED, LINKING OUR PRESENT TO THE PAST.



The district's importance is reflected in its inclusion in the Gullah Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor, a National Heritage Area that stretches from Wilmington, North Carolina to St. Augustine, Florida. The heritage corridor includes coastal lands and offshore barrier islands in four states and physically defines the historic landscape of the past and the unique Gullah Geechee culture. It remains home to descendants of the enslaved people who worked the coastal rice plantations through the mid-1800s and forged their own identity and communities. This Gullah Geechee culture grew from the roots of many different African tribes and traditions and flourished in the southeastern coastal environment of America.

The interactions of African Americans with this coastal environment created cultural landscapes, transforming the marshes of Cathead Creek into rice fields and canals. Following emancipation, African Americans remaining in McIntosh County continued their close interaction with the land by fishing, shrimping, and tree farming. They maintained strong communities forged by this landscape and their unique culture.

A RAPIDLY CHANGING LANDSCAPE

While many areas along Cathead Creek remain pristine and unspoiled, other areas are undergoing extensive change. Houses and business dot the creek's shoreline. The interstate highway, which began in 1970, continues to beckon new development.

African American burial grounds are located within the Cathead Creek Historic District. These include the Oasis, Windy Hill, Ceylon, and Dunwoody cemeteries. Many burial grounds became lost when families moved from the area or the last family member passed away. The Great Migration of the late 1800s and early 1900s resulted in large numbers of rural African Americans leaving the South. They traveled to northern cities, hoping for jobs, fair treatment, and a safe life. This left many communities in the South depopulated with no one to care for the cemeteries. Other cemeteries became covered in vegetation that obscured marked, and especially unmarked, graves.

A PATH TO THE SPIRIT WORLD

Historically, African American families often could not afford stone carved tombstones, and natural stones were not common on the coast. Instead, they marked graves with wooden markers or objects significant to their culture and to the deceased. Objects included mirrors and shimmering items that reflected light such as utensils, coins, and glass. It was believed that the reflection of light off these objects could trap a wayward spirit and illuminate a path for them to the spirit world. Kerosene lamp parts were placed on top of graves to guide those who died at night into the spirit realm. Vessels with water symbolizing the transition between the worlds of the dead and those of the living were common on African American graves. White articles were associated with death and the afterworld. Items such as milk glass, plain whiteware ceramics, porcelain, and bleached seashells held such symbolism on graves. Whelk shells represented the water separating the worlds of the living and the dead, as well as the ocean separating the departed from Africa. Other objects placed on graves included special items of the deceased, such as a favorite cup. Personal items helped the deceased in the afterlife and also served the living by marking where a love one was buried. Often such grave goods are unrecognized as grave markers by others and are discarded.

THE CEMETERIES TODAY

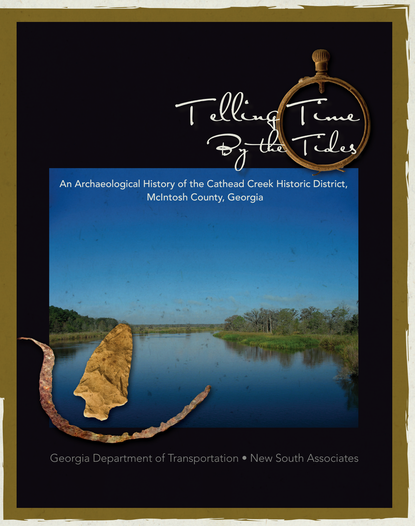
It is most likely that many of these things happened to the Windy Hill Plantation Cemetery, which has become lost to time. Archaeologists were able, however, to relocate and document the African American burial ground of Oasis Plantation Cemetery.

Another cemetery, Ceylon, dates to the early 1800s and was the original burial ground for African Americans enslaved on the Ceylon Plantation. Later, free African Americans buried their dead here as well.

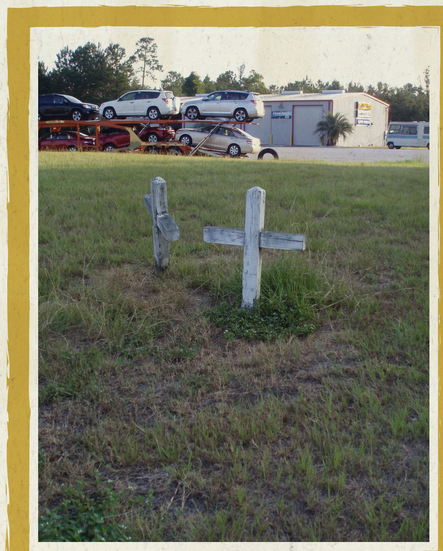
Dunwoody Cemetery began when African Americans on the Sidon Plantation began burying their dead there in the 1700s. African Americans continued to use this cemetery well into the 1900s. Dozens of graves were relocated within the cemetery in 1993 when threatened by private construction.

EFFORTS TO REDUCE LOSS

How can our past be protected against change and time? The Georgia Department of Transportation (GDOT) and the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) constantly seeks ways to do this while building the country's roads. Planned highway interchange improvements to Interstate 95 and Georgia Highway 251 (River Road) impacted portions of the Cathead Creek Historical District. GDOT sought to minimize and mitigate this impact by contracting with New South Associates to conduct the following tasks.



- CREATE A BOOK FOR THE PUBLIC ABOUT CATHEAD CREEK HISTORICAL DISTRICT BASED ON INFORMATION FROM ORAL HISTORIES, ARCHAEOLOGY, AND HISTORICAL RESEARCH.
- ESTABLISH A CEMETERY PRESERVATION PLAN FOR DUNWOODY CEMETERY (ON THE GROUNDS OF CATHEAD/SIDON PLANTATION) TO INCLUDE DESCENDENT RESEARCH, CEMETERY RULES, AND ORAL HISTORIES.
- IDENTIFY, CLEAN, SECURE, AND PRESERVE THE DUNWOODY CEMETERY, IN COLLABORATION WITH THE PUBLIC. IN UNDERTAKING THIS WORK, ARCHAEOLOGISTS ESTIMATED THAT THERE ARE AT LEAST 313 BURIALS THERE, MOST UNMARKED.
- INSTALL FOUR INTERPRETATIVE PANELS IN THE DUNWOODY AND CEYLON CEMETERIES



By establishing a preservation plan, GDOT hopes to improve the cemetery's visibility, as well as that of the Cathead Creek Historic District. The plan also promotes local history, awareness, and pride in the community. The Dunwoody Cemetery is an important cultural link to the customs and practices of African American life of centuries past.

REFERENCES ARE AVAILABLE UPON REQUEST.

GDOT Georgia Department of Transportation

NEW SOUTH ASSOCIATES